



Bresson's Stylistics Revisited

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Bresson's Stylistics Revisited

If in twenty-eight years Robert Bresson has been able to make only ten films, it merely indicates the austerity of his work. He refuses to make his narratives accessible, populating them instead with the proud heroes who are closest to his heart. Where another director would develop a relationship gradually, Bresson gives us only a few scenes, hardly enough to define the psychology of his characters unambiguously. Because of this critics generally describe Bresson as a man determined to deny us experiences, especially richly emotional ones. In terms of ordinary fiction, Bresson's films are indeed ascetic—and those are just the terms critics generally use.

Of this approach André Bazin's early and influential article, "The Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What Is Cinema?*², is rather typical.

Bresson treats the novel [*The Diary of a Country Priest*, from which Besson adapted his film of the same name] as he does his characters. The novel is a cold, hard fact, a reality to be accepted as it stands. One must not attempt to adapt it to the situation in hand, or manipulate it to fit some passing need for an explanation; on the contrary it is something to be taken absolutely as it stands. Bresson never condenses the text, he cuts it. Thus what is left over is a part of the original. Like marble from a quarry the words of the film continue to be part of the novel. (p. 136)

Bresson's film, however, is not an exegesis of the novel, but an independent object. Its images do not set out a reality and then excise certain elements in order to rarify and spiritualize that reality; believing that they do leads Bazin into such critically absurd statements as "It would be in vain to look for its devastating beauty simply in what is explicit [in its images]."

(p. 140) On the contrary: Bresson constructs his images from the beginning to be rarified and, for that matter, devastatingly beautiful. He does not collect or select them from somewhere else; he builds them from scratch. Their significance does not consist simply in what is excluded from them—a cheap enough paradox—but in what has been designed into them.

Bazin's approach is basically that of bourgeois film criticism; it describes films as if they were taken directly, selected, or at best reflected from reality. What is significant, however, is that the "reality" on which Bazin bases his argument here is literary and narrative instead (as usual) of being the real world itself. For Bresson's images are too obviously stylized to be described in terms derived from documentary and applied carelessly to fiction films as well.

But this also holds, though less clearly, for all images. The "reality" from which they are thought to be taken, or which they "reflect," is a synthetic and conventional one, namely our largely literary pictures of the real world. Far from capturing the real world directly, films borrow and echo the signifying forms without which we cannot comprehend material reality.* A film must therefore be criticized in terms of the meanings it constructs for itself from the cultural stockpile on which it rests. That is the basis of a materialist analysis of film—one which sees a film as a cultural object and not a reflection, an illusion of reality, an unfathomable dream, or any other chimera.

(In that case, what is the relation of a documentary or a political film to the reality most

*Even cameras' lens-systems are built so as to reproduce Renaissance perspective, which is the currently accepted convention for "objective" renderings of visible reality.

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AU
HASARD
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critics would say it “records” or “reflects”? That of a critique. Political films are objects to be used as critiques of social reality. Documentaries, which necessarily embody political attitudes, are also critiques, as works of fiction also implicitly are.)

* * * *

At first Bresson’s way of joining things together seems intended more to confuse than to reveal, for he does not follow the sentimental logic after which ordinary narratives are constructed. Bresson erases the categories into which we normally classify various beings. Most important, he breaks down the distinction between subject and object by having his actors move and deliver lines as flatly as possible; this weakens our habit of seeing them as fellow-subjects whose emotions we can share and understand directly. Bresson will treat a firecracker, a donkey, a hood in his black leather jacket, a mess of broken bottles, and an old woman (in one of *Au Hasard Balthazar*’s more astounding scenes) as members of the same order of reality.

Here Bresson’s montage distinguishes itself from that of, say, John Ford, who breaks down

a scene into its constituent small elements (an initial overview, close-ups of each character’s face, a particular grouping of two or three, more close-ups, another particular relationship) so that as the scene is reassembled in the editing room every action will take its place in a hierarchic depiction of social process. By changing levels of significance rapidly, such bourgeois directors achieve great emotional richness: one moment we have the private sentiments of one character, the next the feeling of the whole group. Bresson, on the other hand, renders every dramatic event in one action and one shot, and cuts from one event to the next as if they were completely equivalent emotionally. No complex sentimental or psychological structure is required to assemble the narrative. There is no question here of upsetting the normal order of reality; a film in which event simply succeeds event is, if anything, closer to the workings of the real world than is the bourgeois narrative’s stratification of reality.

Beyond this dramatic structure *Au Hasard Balthazar* has a particular direction, which is transcendental, and which comes from the way Bresson constructs his images. By refusing to

separate subject from object, Bresson enables everything that appears to have an equal significance; there is no longer one spiritual order of being and meaning for characters and another "inanimate" one for objects.

In the absence of the usual hierarchy of more or less meaningful beings, every object signifies directly to us; meaning is imminent in every visible form. The same, however, is true of Godard's recent work, which similarly destroys audience identification with flat acting styles which turn the characters into objects. Godard, however, uses further alienation devices to keep insisting that his images and sounds are deliberate political presentations. Bresson uses none beyond his acting and compositional design, and thus leaves his films among those works which pretend to be naturalistic representations of reality rather than ideological constructions. A work which makes everything equally meaningful, but also represents the real world, is a representation of a world whose material forms are completely spirit—that is, a transcendental reality.

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By angling his camera only slightly to every setting, Bresson minimizes the depth of his shots and leaves few tensions in the third dimension. The actors, moreover, often move across the shot along a slight bias, rather than employing the full depth of the composition. Instead of drawing us deep into the image, Bresson pushes the composition and its actors toward the plane of the screen.

The sense of immediacy this generates is increased by Bresson's staying close to his subject. Scenes are introduced by close-ups; instead of building up to the core of the action like a conventional dramatist, Bresson hits us with it immediately, then moves on to something equally important. Only the most significant events are left: Bresson eschews all connective material, which would not be meaningful in itself but only insofar as it helped explain more important events.

There are no contemplative passages and few long shots; Bresson constantly moves the camera in on his characters as if he wanted to reduce their physical context to the necessary

minimum. Similarly, the camera stays close to a character and pans to follow him through a scene, instead of holding back in long-shot or cutting between shots of him in different positions. Though this would give a clearer view of his actions, it would explain his relationship to other objects and characters by using three-dimensional space analytically—each figure in a given spatial location, each location with a special significance. Bresson refuses to endow spatial structures with any independent significance; meaning must come directly from objects themselves.

One feels very strongly, then, that Bresson's characters are fixed in their physical surroundings; there can be no transcendence of their material context. They are not fellow-subjects whom we can abstract from the images in which they appear. But if they enjoy no relief from their world, and experience all events on the same emotional level, they also experience only things which are essentially meaningful.

One also has a very strong and confining sense of the passage of time, for Bresson depicts events strictly in sequence, never using a flashback and frequently cutting ahead weeks or years without warning. This passage of time, however, is not progress or development in the conventional sense for the characters, since the logic of their situation does not change. The world in which they act remains flat and rigorously present; only the present exists.

Gradually, however, a marvelous completeness grows through the accumulation of complete facts. By showing each event in a single action Bresson condenses his narrative and moves through situations with unprecedented speed. *Au Hasard Balthazar* covers extraordinary distances; at the same time its lack of compositional depth gives the film a linear continuity from one image through the next. By its ending the film has developed, completely without the aid of normal explanatory connectives between events, to a point of meaningfulness which is unique in its refusal, at every moment, to be sentimental. From the rigor of his style Bresson has built a really new narrative, which is to say a new way of looking at the world, a new mode of understanding.